

# Church in a Democratic Society and Democracy in Churches of The Baptist Union in Croatia

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## Abstract

*Democracy is a pluralist form of government where the decisions are made directly or indirectly through the majority of votes. This article deals with analyzing the correlation between the level of democracy in society and the level of democracy in managing local Baptist churches in the Baptist Union in Croatia, which is structurally based on a congregational model of management.*

## Introduction

Is democracy strictly connected to society, or is it possible to achieve it in church as well? Should the church leaders use autocracy or democracy? Can different churches have various leadership models with varying levels of democracy? This article will try to find the answers to these and similar questions. In this article, we explore the internal structures and levels of democracy in different local Baptist churches which are part of the Baptist Union in Croatia.

When we talk about democracy in today's society, there is the question of whether it's possible to combine democracy with Christianity at all, and in what way. Democracy is a political system where the government comes from the people, and it is elected in free elections by a majority of votes. It represents the most advanced form of the civilized social systems. Every nation strives to attain a sovereign and free country with a democratic system in place. The level of democracy in a church fellowship can partly be seen in its organizational structure.

So, in some churches the management and decisions will be made by appointed or elected church ministers, while in others, all believers take part in managing the church.

## **Democracy in society in Croatia**

The society we live in has been marked by the process of relativization of the absolutes. Everything becomes relative and everything is questioned. What used to be considered as postulates and foundations of society yesterday are no longer held as such. It is hinted that the social norms are no longer as firm and as indisputable as they used to be in the past. In today's democracy, the Church is encountering attitudes which contradict it. Under the wing of democratic processes and individual rights there are some new tasks before the Church where it has to get involved and answer some questions which it never encountered during the past. Also, the Church never had any analogous experiences regarding contemporary trends. For many years, the Church had been stifled by the Communist regime, which claimed it was democratic and coming from the people. In all this, the actual realization of democracy depended more on the people's mentality and mindset and less on the theoretical foundations of democracy. The mindset where culture and civilization happen is specific and typical to that particular nation. That is why a church that is part of a nation is also an integral part of its mindset, and as such, it participates in that specific mentality. Commitment to democracy is one thing; living according to its principles is quite another. In Croatia, the term "democracy" used to be identified with the term "public property". In that sense, "public" referred to the ownership by everybody, and not just a single owner, such as a private, group, or state owner. Without actual ownership, owning property was, in itself, impossible.

When speaking about democracy, we usually translate the word as "the rule of the people". The word "*democracy*" comes from the Greek word, "δημοκρατία", which is in turn derived from "δημος," which means, "the people"; and "κρατειν," which means, "to rule"; and the suffix "ία." This is what Marasović (1996, 35) wrote about the rule of the people:

Since every government implies who it is that rules, and who is being ruled over, it's unthinkable to say that the people could rule over itself. Such a thing is only possible for an individual person, and exclusively in the moral sense, while it is simply impossible for a nation, which is comprised of a multitude of individuals. So, if democracy is understood as the rule of the people over itself, it becomes a nonsensical term, and even reality refutes something like this, because it is not the people who rule in a democracy, but the government that has been elected by the people.

When we speak about the democratic society, we are referring to a society characterized by the rule of the people. We also imply that this is a society with a multiparty system where power is attained through democratic pluralist elections. It is a society with a threefold division of authority (legislative, executive, and judicial). If there was no one to rule over the people, anarchy would ensue instead of the democratization of society. In democracy, all citizens are valued equally, and every person has their human dignity. Democracy is characterized by the equality of every vote, no matter the voter's gender. Democracy also implies the freedom to decide through secret voting; the freedom of information and expression; human rights and dignity; security and welfare. It is characterized by making decisions collectively. The most ancient known form of democracy is found in 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, in the Greek city of Kios, and it truly flourished during the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, during the time of Pericles in Athens. Later on, democracy appeared in Rome through the consul government system, the Senate, and the people's tribunes. Reformation and democracy are connected as well. The principles of modern democracy have gradually developed from the Calvinist Reformation movement during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, from Scotland through England and to the Netherlands. The first modern democratic countries were the United States of America, and France. These countries don't represent one of the possible state regimes, but a generally accepted political order. There are different kinds of democracies: liberal democracy, civil democracy, people's democracy, socialist democracy, democracy of majority, constitutional democracy, direct democracy, representational democracy, etc. Two types of democracy are most commonly cited: direct democracy, and representational democracy, which is tied in with two other basic systems of government: parliamentarism, and presidential democracy. Based on the decision made by the United Nations General Assembly in 2007, September 15<sup>th</sup> was declared International Day of Democracy. In other words, we can conclude that the only thing that is a given for every person in a democracy is their human dignity. However, is that really the case? In its qualified approach, democracy loses sight of quality. Thus, it becomes possible for a group of individuals, mostly unqualified and incompetent in certain areas, to outvote numerous expert individuals. In this, we start with the assumption that the society as a whole is mature and capable to assess which things are socially beneficial, and which are not. In the last few years, democracy in society is often achieved in the form of rule of political parties, i.e., participacy. The character of the rule of a party is usually best shown by the passage of time.

If a party is autocratic in its internal structure, and exclusive in its program, once when it rises to power not only will it not care for the interests and desires of the voters who have given their vote to the parties which didn't even enter the Parliament, but it will also not pay much attention to the opinions

of other parliamentary, ie., opposing parties, even though there is an elective body behind them whose rights and interests should indeed be taken into consideration - at least to the extent to which they're present on the political stage through their votes. Therefore, we can say that every democracy is actually a partocracy, but not every partocracy is a democracy." (Marasović 1996, 37).

The attitude of the democratic society towards partocracy in the Republic of Croatia is clearly seen in the attitude of the electing body in state or local elections. The voters no longer know whether they should go out and vote or not. They eventually reach the conclusion that, whether it's "communists, liberals, conservatives, or nationalists, they're all the same." When we look back to social systems in developed West European countries, we see that it's possible to have a monarchy, ie., kingdom with a developed parliamentary democratic system, while we also see republics with strongly pronounced autocratic systems. In his reflections on governing societies, Thomas Aquinas (1990, 53) said,

If unjust rule is not implemented by one man but several of them, it is called an oligarchy; ie., the rule of the minority, where a small number of people oppresses the nation with the purpose of becoming rich, and the only difference between them and a tyrant is in the fact that there are more of them. If the unjust rule is implemented by a multitude of people, it is then called a democracy; ie., the rule of the people, when the people uses the power of its great number in order to oppress the rich; at that point, the entire people becomes a tyrant. We should make the same differentiation with just rule as well. If just rule is implemented by a multitude, it is then usually called a republic (politia).

It is evident from this quote that Thomas is following after Plato and Aristotle in offering his own understanding of the word "democracy." What we understand as democracy today was referred to as a "republic" by ancient Greek philosophers. In order to prevent democracy from becoming totalitarianism or anarchy, theoreticians of democracy began to give greater significance to "nomos" - i.e., the law - alongside the "demos". We are witnesses to the fact that it is those who are in power who are the ones who correct the laws. Without laws, there is no government. And it is precisely this form of democracy with clearly emphasized elements of nomocracy that is not unfamiliar in church.

## **Democracy and the internal church structure**

The importance of church is recognized in the democratic structures in society. It is also recognized that the church has a role in society and that it's a moral authority. It is possible to create a division between the will of the majority of the

people, and the teachings of the church, or the moral law. Through its presence in society and its teaching, the church contributes to spreading social and moral values, and to the good of humanity in general. During history, democracy wasn't viewed in the same way as it is today. This is vividly described by Marasović (1996, 41):

The acceptance of democracy in the Church didn't go smoothly nor quickly. The reasons for this are numerous, but one way or another, they all boil down to the "two swords" theory, which saw its ultimate development in the bulla of Bonifatius VIII, *Unam sanctam*. It is actually a feudal understanding of government, ie., a feudal understanding of the relationship between the Church and state. According to this understanding, all authority comes directly from God. It is divided into church authority and worldly authority - hence the phrase "two swords" - where spiritual authority takes precedence over the worldly authority. This precedence is manifested in a special and symbolic way during the inauguration of a new ruler, when he has his symbols of power (crown, scepter, or sword) handed to him by a representative of the spiritual authority. This kind of relationship between the worldly and spiritual authorities was expected to result in their synchronization, ie., in the synchronized implementation of both types of authority.

History teaches us that it was actually the Church and the secular authorities that continually struggled for predominance. The goal of every ruler was to have both swords; the secular and the spiritual. The tensions between the ecclesiastic and the democratic-secular logic have not vanished during history. They have always been present, and they have achieved greater or lesser levels of mutual communication. During church history, democracy was observed with incredulity, mostly because of the fact that, in terms of cause and effect, democracy implies secularization. In this way, the church would lose the spiritual connection it had up until then, and secularization steps in. In Romans 13:1, the apostle Paul warns us that "there is no authority except from God." Therefore, we mustn't forget that *theos* and *demos* are mutually connected. However, we have seen that the *demos* usually pays no regard for its theological foundation when it begins to rule. Instead of forming social values together with theocracy, democracy competes against it. And not only does it compete with it, but it also disregards the fundamental Christian values. Crises happen when the weakest segments of society begin to break, which have discarded God's authority as the ultimate source of every authority. On the other hand, we observe that democracy as the rule of people no longer implies the entire society, or at least its majority. Democracy is approached as a group of individuals, who collectively make up a nation. As members of a democratic society, each one of those individuals can be the weakest part of the homogeneous society. That's why each individual's attitude is important, and not just that of the nation as a whole.

Church history shows that, whether the church was from a Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant background, its purpose was always to correct the overall course of action in society in accordance with the Holy Scriptures. During this process, it encounters various attitudes coming from individuals who pose as ultimate authorities. Secularization and liberal individualism are the characteristics “adorning” today’s democracy. A small number of individuals is able to impose their attitude and oppress the majority, and as they do this the government institutions protect them, because they’re acting “on behalf of democracy.” On the other hand, the mission of the church is to warn about and point out evil, and to call for the change of attitude in individuals and the society as a whole.

Europe is now in a moral and spiritual crisis, primarily because any standards and frames of behavior and living have been lost. The individual’s only standard is himself. Democracy is characterized by a common submission to the common *Logos*. If the material understanding of democracy were to be made absolute and applied to all areas of social life, democracy would assume characteristics of totalitarianism. If the church were to be radically democratized, it would become estranged from its very essence. In the church, it is not the people who are sovereign, as is erroneously perceived, but it is Jesus Christ.

When we analyze the internal part of church structure which speaks of the level of democracy, we see that there are three models of church management in Christian churches. These include: the episcopal, Presbyterian, and congregational models (Moriss 1964, 91). The episcopal model of church management comes from the Greek word “*episkopos*”, which means “overseer.” Instead of the term “overseer”, the term “bishop” is often used. Bishops run the church “from above” and downward, and all important church decisions belong in their jurisdiction, while believers don’t have a right to be involved in decision-making. This model is most pronounced in the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Old Catholic, and Anglican churches. Ordinance is reserved for the bishop, who is the only one with the right of ordination, due to apostolic succession. This is why there’s no democratic decision-making on many issues inside the Church. The Roman Catholic attitude towards democracy in church can be read in the words of cardinal and theologian Walter Kasper. Kasper states that the Church is not a democracy, nor is it a monarchy, and it is especially not a totalitarian system. As an institution of “*its own right*”, it is in principle different from any worldly and national system, but it still lives and acts in history. During its history it has been continually adopting elements of profane state systems for the purpose of concrete formation of its own structure (Kasper 2013, 320). In this way, the development of democracy allowed the church to promote the equality of people and their dignity, but in the context of Scripture. Solidarity in the lives of Christians was developed in church fellowship. “We need to be reminded of the

principles of the Church's social teaching, especially the principle of subsidiarity. As in modern times, there is also a wide space within Church for freedom to join in, for initiatives, for activities, and non-profits." (Kasper 2013, 320). In spite of their hierarchy, churches with the episcopal structure formed inside their bodies various committees which were supposed to deal with specific issues in the congregation. Membership in the council is available to the more prominent believers, who are allowed to take part in its work through their contribution. All such forms of internal bodies of the church are individual democratic elements in the church. On the other hand, members of democratic societies and believers today express the attitude that the church may in no way view them as its subordinates. That is why emphasis is placed on the need for fellowship (communion), and less on the authoritative and managerial attitude of the clergy toward believers.

The Presbyterian model of church governance comes from the Greek word "*presbyteros*", which translates as "elder." Managing the church has been entrusted to the elders who have been selected by the entire church fellowship, i.e., all the members of the local church as suggested by the presbytery. In this way, the entire church fellowship, or assembly, is included in the structure, while church management remains under the jurisdiction of the elders. This structure model is characteristic of Lutherans, Calvinists, Mennonites, Methodists, and Pentecostals (Williams 1986, 60). These churches are permanently faced with a challenge of finding specific forms of leading, which will enable the church to have official authority, but which will also allow Christian freedom in the life of the church. "If the ministry and the authority in church are primarily founded and structured as a "Christocracy", they should never become a rule of people over other people, and are nothing more than the incarnation of the only Savior Jesus Christ, and a radical self-giving in the service of this only power." (Lehman 1971, 178) In modern society, the church acts on the authority it has in Jesus Christ. However, it is supposed to implement this authority in the manner Jesus Christ did: as self-sacrificial service. Jesus Christ Himself left us an authentic example: "*and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave*" (Mt 20:27). A person who wants to be an elder should show by their example the acts of serving their neighbor. Since the Presbyterian model of church structure implies that the authority of leading the church belongs to the presbyters or elders, in some situations the Presbyterian form of authority can begin to strive towards autocratic rule. It is thus advised that presbytery or the council of elders consists of at least three elders who will work together and make decisions together. Having in mind the development and practice of internal structure and leadership of church fellowships, it is obvious that the traditional Reformation churches use the Presbyterian model of church structure with some elements of the congregational structure. The weakening of the Presbyterian structure is becoming noticeable in Reformation-heri-

tage churches, and the congregational structure is becoming more pronounced.

The congregational model of church management has its root in the Latin word “*congregatio*”, which implies a company of people. In English, the word “*congregation*” refers to a religious fellowship. According to this structure, “a local fellowship is independent and self-governing. The fellowship has authority as a whole; so the congregational structure is, in fact, a democratic system” (Williams 1986, 60). In such a church fellowship, everybody’s equal. There is no division between clergy and laymen. In this way, “nobody is able to hold power over a local fellowship of the Christian church. The local fellowship is the basic unit, and no single person or group has any right over it” (Morris 1964, 105). Local churches are independently led by the entire fellowship of believers. This kind of internal structure is present among Congregationalists, Baptists, Free Brethren, and Quakers (Williams 1986, 60). In the ecclesiological daily life, democratic principles are applied in voting for church ministers, in approving rule books, statutes, etc. All church members have the same rights, just as all churches have equal rights and advantages in working for God (Horak 1989, 53). All believers are equally valuable in the local church, although pastors, elders, and deacons have the greatest authority. The local fellowship has a democratically elected leadership, through the majority of votes. According to the congregational model of church structure, Christ is the head of the church, (Col 1:18), and the center of it is the priesthood of all believers (1 Pt 2:9-17) (Jambrek 2003, 277). Having these passages in mind, all believers are accountable to become actively involved in the work of the local church, and they are obligated to adhere to high moral standards in their practical lives.

We can conclude that, no matter what the model of the internal structure of the church fellowship, whether it shows a greater or less level of democracy, it will still continue to act and to bear witness for Christ in its society. No social order was tailored after the Christian measure; instead, Christians need to fight for Christian values in every one of them. Depending on who the society comprises of, such will the democracy of the society be. In a society where believers whose lives clearly reflects Christ’s character prevail, then Christian values will be clearly represented in the society as a whole. Thanks to generally accepted and consistently implemented laws regarding human freedoms and the freedom of religion, the democratic structure of the society is working in favor of the Church. Freedom is the fundamental determinant of democracy. Freedom can be used or abused, which doesn’t make freedom a bad thing. In democracy, the church as an institution and as a gathering of God’s people, has an opportunity to be socially present and active. Through its authority, it is supposed to represent and express Christian standards for social and political life. The process of directing and developing the awareness of the importance of freedom starts from the earli-



est catechetical days, so that later on as adults people would have clearly defined attitudes and values. Firmly rooted people of God, who are filled with the Holy Spirit, who are active and present in their social community, prevents the democratic system in society from being abused.

## **Internal structure and the level of democracy in the Baptist Union in Croatia**

Baptist Churches<sup>1</sup> belong among the churches that have, in terms of their historical heritage, been directly tied to traditional Protestant churches. The emergence and development of the Baptist movement was directly influenced by Reformation movements among Puritans in England during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, along with the influence of the Anabaptist movement. Baptists began acting as an organized church in 1609, when the first Baptist church was founded in Amsterdam (Horak 1989, 9), and on American soil, in Rhode Island in 1670 (Klem 1962, 74). The first Baptist who was known to have visited Zagreb was Edward Millard in 1868 (1822-1906) (Knežević 2001, 39). Baptists appeared in Croatia during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There are records of the first Baptist gatherings in 1872/73, in Zagreb. On the turn from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Baptist fellowship in Zagreb was led by the preacher, Franz Horak. He worked throughout Croatia as a Bible street seller, spreading the Good News (Knežević 2012, 22). The first organized Baptist church was founded in 1891 in Zagreb. In 1883, a Baptist church was founded in Daruvar as well, and it was led by Johann Lotz (1855–1921) (Knežević 2012, 23). From the very beginning, the Baptist movement applied the principles which, according to Everett Gill<sup>2</sup>, were present in the early Church as well. The principles which he laid out were: church organization was based on democratic self-governance with elders, where every believer participates in the Church personally and willingly; the number of symbols in the rituals has been brought down to minimum; the priesthood is comprised of all believers, and there is the right of personal discernment in interpreting Scripture; the teaching is spread through preaching, which makes every believer a missionary (Gill 1934, 5-6). In terms of its relationship with the state, in a free country, the church is also free. Gill notes that various other forms of church government, which the world has gotten used to, are simply consequences of the development of mankind. These changes and additions may not be considered as authentic by scrupulous Christians.

1 <http://www.baptist.hr/>

2 Everett Gill was the representative of the Baptist Mission in Europe between the two World Wars.

If we believe in the authority of Christ; if we believe in the wisdom of the Holy Spirit; if we believe that this Spirit was leading the apostles; if we believe that the judgment of history is accurate - it is clear that it is our duty to follow the teaching of the apostles as much as we can. With these thoughts in our hearts, we approach studying of the New Testament, inasmuch as it speaks about the order and the work of the churches of Christ (Gill 1934, 5-6).

In explaining the meaning of the word “church” to the few members of Baptist churches in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, he notes that,

the word ‘church’ in Greek means ‘an assembly’ of citizens who have been called from their homes and workshops in order to discuss a matter of common importance. Such a gathering may be the purest form of democracy in history, where each voter may express their opinion and vote. The decisions were made through the majority of votes (Gill 1934, 14).

It’s interesting to note that even today, the older members of Baptist churches still use the word “in the assembly” when referring to one’s presence in worship service, which reinforces the congregational consciousness. Historically speaking, and having Gill’s view in mind, the internal structure of the Baptist Church comprised of two types of church ministers: the elders, or overseers (ie., a pastor or bishop), who were governing the church; and the deacons, whose role was to help them in governing. Speaking of stewardship over the church in the context of the New Testament, which was directly applied to the local Baptist church in the time between the two World wars, Gill emphasizes that churches are self-governing, free democratic bodies, ie., associations of Christians under Christ’s rule. They are not under the authority or the jurisdiction of any other church or body, or of an elder of such body. They are responsible to Christ for the way they are managed. In applying the New Testament model to Baptist churches between the two World Wars, Dr. Gill expresses the attitude that,

the principle of freedom and autonomy of local churches is one of the most sacred or most unreliable and, historically, one of the most basic principles of Christians who’ve always called themselves Baptists. This was the foundation for the development and the strength of our people in all countries, where they’ve made the most progress, and they offered their most sublime testimony for NT Christianity. Those who wish to institute autocracy into Baptist churches are in conflict with the clear NT teaching and with the Baptist teaching all over the world, and they are desecrating it: they are violating the basic democratic principle upon which the NT churches were founded (Gill 1934, 41-43).

In the same way, Franjo Klem notes that the *spirit of freedom* which filled the Baptists, as well as the democratic atmosphere in their church structure, contributed vastly to their development (Klem 1962, 74). Just like in the beginnings of the Baptist movement, the same applies today: people become members by free

consent, through confessing the faith, and baptism. When it comes to forming a new independent church on a local level, it was usual for an existing Baptist church to organize a mission station. It was recommended that the new local church should have at least one elder (bishop) who'll be in charge of pastoral ministry, and a deacon. There is an interesting and detailed regulation by which a "mission station" can become a local church. After the leadership has been defined and worship services are held regularly, it's necessary to:

determine the time and place for the properly elected delegates or representatives from Baptist churches and organize matters. 1. These church representatives need to be organized as an Organizing Council with a Chairman, who will be elected among themselves, and who needs to take care of the worship services as well. 2. The Chairman needs to convoke the Council, and after prayer the following things need to be done: a) the members who are uniting need to come before the Chairman with a document which needs to be read before the assembly, and which needs to comprise of the following points: 1. A specifically stated desire to form a new Baptist church. 2. A declaration of faith in written form, which will clearly show that they agree with the views and teachings of all Baptists in the world. 3. A church vow in written form, where the duties and rights of the church members are stated, as well as their calling as a church. 4. After all these things have been done, the Chairman will declare the members who are being organized as fit of having a church, and he will call upon them to begin electing their ministers. They will then choose a name for their church, and newly organized church will conclude the matter through voting. After that, the Chairman will formally declare this body to be a properly organized Baptist church on behalf of the Organization Committee, and as a sign of this, he will extend his right hand to the newly appointed ministers of the new church. The worship service can also be continued by the church representatives holding special sermons about the calling or the mission of church; about the duties of the ministers towards the church; and the duties of the church towards its ministers (Gill 1934, 62-63).

We read about the level of democracy and equality in the congregation of believers in Article 16 of the *Constitution of the Baptist Church*, which was approved on November 30<sup>th</sup> 1963, which states, "Every member of the Baptist Church has the right to take part in church consultations, to elect and to be elected as member of the Committee, elder, preacher, deacon, or delegate in the assembly, and the principles of the Scriptures need to be adhered to." Managing the church was usually done by the Committee. Article 18 of the same Constitution says, "The Baptist church is governed by a church committee, led by an elder, a preacher, or a chairman, who has been elected from among the most spiritual believers in the church." The next, Article 19, speaks specifically about the structure of the committee itself, and it states,

The church committee is elected as necessary, and it consists from the chairman, vice-chairman, a secretary, a treasurer, and other elected committee members, i.e., every church chooses their elders according to their wish and needs. Their duties include taking care of the spiritual progress of the church; managing church assets and its institutions; implementing decisions made by the church assembly; representing the church before the authorities; being in charge of the church's administrative affairs; convoking and preparing the schedules for committee and church sessions; managing the publication of spiritual literature; and participating in financing the expenses of the county and the Union.

Article 21 talks about who is the responsible person in charge of representing the church. In matters of administration, the appointed elder/preacher, i.e., chairman and secretary, are the ones who sign, and in matters which are more important, it is the entire Committee, i.e., the persons who were elected by the Committee. Considering that every member is also a part of the church assembly, Article 24 says,

The church assembly resolves all the major issues in church, as well as all its problems and plans. The voting is done secretly or publicly, as previously agreed by the church. Such counseling needs to be done in a timely fashion. If the number of believers in the assembly is insufficient (2/3 of all the members), the counseling will be postponed for another week, when the session is held if at least half of the members are present. The motion is accepted if more than half of the members present vote in favor of it. If the votes are divided, the decision-making process will be postponed and a consensual solution will be sought.

Also, the Constitution predicts the moment when a new church can be opened, which is also touched upon by Article 28.

As soon as there's a sufficient number of believers in a town or area to be able to elect a church Committee with a preacher-elder, and to exist on its own, they are able to start a church. If that isn't the case, the group of believers comprises a mission station, which falls under the jurisdiction of the parent church.

If any financial disagreements occur, Article 29 is applied, which regulates the interdependence between the local congregation and the higher organizational bodies (the county and the Union). There it is stated that, "in case of a split in the church, all its assets are transferred to the ownership of the higher autonomous body." Although many situations have been defined, there were yet various misunderstandings and failures to accept certain forms of leadership. Since it was possible for one person to perform multiple functions, and the same person was able to be the preacher, an elder, an overseer, and chairman, in some cases this

has led to certain problems. On the other hand, due to the autonomy of the local congregation, different attitudes regarding the structure could be expressed and accepted. That's why we encounter various models in different local churches. Franjo Klem, a long-term worker in different bodies of the Baptist Union in Yugoslavia, wrote about this. He concluded,

The question of eldership in Baptist Churches in our parts isn't a uniform solution, and there are many ambiguities in a lot of issues, which is causing a lot of problems. We have brothers who call themselves elders but are not; and who bear the title of preacher, but have no right to do so. There is no distinction between elders and preachers, and the terms are used interchangeably. Only some city churches and few village churches have ordained preachers, who have been chosen and ordained for the role. Some are paid, but most aren't. Only the churches in the Daruvar church county had an ordained county elder alongside their preacher. The preacher was in charge for the service of the Word, while the elder was in charge of overseeing life and activities in the county (Klem 1974, 43).

Having in mind the time of the writing of this text, it is evident that the Baptist churches of the day didn't have a defined structure of church leadership with clearly defined functions. The situation was further exacerbated by the differences in church jurisdiction between the chairman of the county, and his engagement at the local level in his church congregation, as well as in defining his jurisdiction as elder. The question was raised whether he was in charge of all local churches who belong in the county, or just one, or something else entirely. There were similar misunderstandings in regards to other church functions as well. Franjo Klem gives us an analysis of the condition in Baptist congregations in 1974, and he concludes that there are only a few deacons in churches, and that their roles were unknown. Also, the role of the deacon was often confused for that of the preacher and the elder. He concludes that the deacons usually helped during distributing the Lord's Supper and with collecting offerings (Klem 1974, 43). In order to reconcile the possibilities and the needs of the Baptist church, Franjo Klem lays out a leadership model in which leadership over churches would be entrusted to an ordained elder, who would provide the service of the Word and care for the spiritual needs of the congregation and of its mission station. If it so happens that the church has adequate means of support at its disposal, he can receive his support from the church and be completely dedicated to the work in church and mission. However, most of the time this ministry was performed by elders who already had jobs, and they had performed this office in church pro bono. Elders and deacons, who were ordained by laying on of hands together with the elected believers, become the church elders. A number of such churches would unite into a county and they would choose a qualified preacher for the

benefit of the Gospel and Christian upbringing. In this way, the preacher should be the driving force for the entire county and to minister the Word in several churches. Such a person would be in charge of evangelism, spiritual teaching, and organizing courses and conferences. The preacher would be the driving force for the entire organism, and would spend his full time in the service of the Lord in his county, which would also support him financially. Klem concludes that, for that particular moment in time (and this was the middle of the 1970's), this was the only viable method of church structure, because the currently available means for supporting the preacher were not sufficient, and he adds,

only the church which supports its preacher has the right and the moral strength to ask him for greater involvement. In such a county, all the ordained elders, together with the preacher and some other selected persons, are the eldership county of churches. This kind of organizational structure is much closer to the Biblical concept, than the system we currently practice (Klem 1974, 40).

Although this type of leadership and church organization increases the level of democracy in governing churches, it took quite some time for this mode to take hold. In writing about church structure, in his book, *"Baptists, History, And Principles of Belief"*, longtime President of the Baptist Union, Josip Horak, notes,

The Baptists hold that the church needs to be managed democratically, and that it should be completely autonomous. Every church assembly is free and independent. No other church nor group in the church have the power over another church or a group of churches. Based on their own conversion, baptism, and personal faith, individuals freely join the church... The church has no right to exercise coercion over the religious lives of its members... Local churches can voluntarily join into higher bodies, into counties, and alliances... There is no conflict regarding the jurisdiction of churches and higher organizational bodies, whose purpose it is to mediate in mutual cooperation and coordination of their work, and providing the material and spiritual help when it's asked for. Representatives and delegates from local churches take part in higher organizational bodies, and they work in the spirit of the needs and desires of their congregations in terms of making decisions in local churches, but the delegates also vote and act as individuals, as free believers in Christ. The higher organizational bodies are also autonomous and have no power over one another. Everybody makes their own regulations and rules, sets their own goals and tasks, territorial limitations, and methods of work (Horak 1989, 53-54).

Horak also reflected on the ministries in church, detecting only one form of governance, and he said,

Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, and the local church is led by the el-

ders and deacons according to New Testament principles. The words “bishop” (episkopos in Greek) and “elder” (presbyteros) are the same office for Jews. They serve as “shepherds”, which gives us the modern word for a preacher: pastor. Pastors are chosen by church members, who have considered their life and their work... Every member of the church needs to actively participate in Christ’s service, to work on building His church as a worker, because the Lord has a purpose for every believer (Horak 1989, 54-57).

## **Leadership in the Baptist Union in Croatia**

At the inaugural session of the Baptist Union in Croatia held on April 13<sup>th</sup> 1991, a Statute was passed which says that the Assembly is the body that governs the Union. Each church, group, center, or institution send their delegates to the Union Assembly. In churches, there is one representative per 50 members, and the other Assembly members are represented by one delegate each. The decisions made by the Assembly are considered legitimate if they are brought by a two-third majority. The Union leadership’s term is four years. The Assembly is presided over by the Chairman, who has a deputy, and its duties include: passing the Union Statute; the selection of the Executive Board of the Union; determining the Union’s areas of activity; and starting funds for helping certain activities; planning the Union activities; analyzing and accepting the Union’s financial reports; and electing the Monitoring Committee. The Union’s Monitoring Committee consists of the Union’s president, vice-president, main secretary, treasurer, and five members of the Monitoring Committee. Members of the Monitoring Committee choose the president of the Monitoring Committee from among themselves, and its task is to monitor and control the activities of the Union and of the Executive Board. Then it is to submit reports and suggestions to the Union Assembly. In the Rules of Procedure which was passed at the Assembly session held on May 4<sup>th</sup> 1996, Article 2 says that, “the admittance of new members into the Union follows after the Union Assembly positively resolves the admittance application, as suggested by the Executive Board, through public voting with a two-third majority. Through registration into the Union Members Registry, one becomes a full member of the Baptist Union in Croatia. According to the amendment to the Statute of the Baptist Union in Croatia it is also added: The Statute of the local Baptist church dated April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1998, which was co-signed by the president of the Baptist Union in Croatia, Branko Lovrec, and the president of the Assembly of the Baptist Union in Croatia, Giorgio Grlj. This document regulates the organization and the work of local Baptist churches in Croatia. In the Preamble to the Statute of local Baptist churches, Article 2 of the Statute of Baptist Union in Croatia at the time says that the founders of the Baptist Union in Croatia (local Baptist churches

and others) “still remain legal entities, which means they remain autonomous as stated by their statutes, rule-books, and rules of procedure...” This presupposes that the local Baptist churches make their own status and/or other regulations independently. This is in line with the spirit of the Baptist concept of local churches, which emphasizes the willingness and the free approach of believers to the congregation, and at the same time the freedom of creating and organizing its own church life and spiritual practice. In this way, the congregational model of managing religious congregations becomes prominent. However, as time went by, the need for standardizing church practice became even more obvious, with the purpose of a clearer presentation and preservation of the Baptist identity. In the Assembly of the Baptist Union in Croatia held on April 25<sup>th</sup> 1997 in Crikvenica, an additional chapter of the BCA Statute was passed, called: *The Statute of The Local Baptist Church*, which basically regulates the organization of the local Baptist church, and serves as framework criteria for creating statutes for local Baptist churches.<sup>3</sup> According to this statute, a local Baptist church is the fundamental organizational structure for Baptist believers in a place or region. A local church is a legal entity, and it joins the Baptist Union in Croatia freely and willingly. The local church adheres to the so-called religious and civil principle of “*a free church in a free country*,” which had been especially characteristic of Baptist churches during history. That is why it was separated from the state and from any inclusion in political parties. According to the Statute, the local church can be independently structured and organized inasmuch as it’s possible to independently hold and lead regular worship services, church rituals, and other church meetings; to support itself independently and to have at least 10 members. A group of Baptist believers who do not meet these requirements, but have a permanent intention to become organized and called a local church in the making, is basically connected to a local church. An individual becomes a member of their local church willingly and by freely approaching a fellowship of believers. In order to prevent abuse of freedom in interpreting the Bible, in reference to the Article 10 of the Constitution of The Baptist Churches in FNRH, which states, “The Baptist Church allows each one of its members to study and interpret the Bible,” Article 6 of the Statute for local Baptist churches determines,

Every member of a local church can freely and individually read and interpret the Bible with the purpose of their personal growth in faith. However, as a group of believers, the local church also recognizes unity in the charisma - gifts and ministries of the Spirit in the congregation, which have the purpose of building up the church, and based on this it appoints certain members to provide the service of the Word, as well as other leading ministries in a local church.

3 The Statute of the local Baptist churches passed in Crikvenica on April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1998.



The organization of church life, the content and the order of worship services is, in principle, regulated by the Order of Worship in Baptist Churches in Croatia. However, every local church is free and independent to create its own model of holding worship services. Article 9 says,

Starting with the structure of the early Christian fellowship, as well as the life practice of the local church viewed as an intertwining of the fellowship of the gifts of the Spirit and the fellowship of various ministries, it is possible to differentiate between many ministries in the local church, that are aimed at the benefit of the entire believing community. Any member can be recognized as the bearer of some of the ministries in the local church. However, it is the local who recognizes the members who are the bearers of charismas for the leading offices in the local church. These ministries are as follows: pastor or preacher; elder; and deacon. The bearers of these leading ministries have been ordained for their ministries. The concept, significance, and the procedure of ordination has been described in the Order of Worship of Baptist Churches in Croatia.

According to a survey<sup>4</sup> regarding the structure of leadership in the local Baptist church, it's become noticeable that, in practice, there are various non-unified forms and models of governing. The most usual way of leading a local church is with the help of a church committee or council. The committee consists of varying numbers of elders and deacons, mostly in odd numbers, and a pastor (if there is one) and other church members, as needed. In some churches the leading role is assumed by an elder, while in others it is the pastor, who is also one of the elders. Some church congregations only have a leader, others have a pastor, and yet others just have an elder or a deacon. In some smaller churches, where there's no ordained elder or pastor, the leading of the local church has been entrusted to the deacon. In some churches with very few believers, there are no elders nor deacons, but just a committee comprised of the leading members of the local church. We can therefore conclude that there is a need for a clearly recommended form of local church leadership, which was the purpose of the Statute of the local Baptist church.

In Article 10 of the said Statute we find that the pastor or preacher is the most responsible office in a local church. He is usually an ordained full-time church worker. Along with the preaching and soul-nurturing ministries, he is also responsible for the work of the local church which he's serving in. It is recommended that he has finished a higher form of theological education, and that he is a member of the local church. The ministry period of the pastor or preacher is a four-year long term.

4 According to a survey conducted in February 2016 on the sample of 36 representatives of local Baptist churches in Croatia.

According to Article 11, an elder is a church minister who is elected by the assembly of the local church, whose ministry is term-based and lasts for four years. An elder is a member of the council of elders and, along with the other elected elders, he ministers in leading the local church. In accordance with the decision of the individual local church, the elders are able to perform certain church rituals in the absence of the pastor or preacher. The elders have been ordained for their ministry.

Article 12 says that the deacon is a church minister who has been appointed through the decision of the local church to lead various ministries, as well as to lead worship services with the approval, or in the absence of the pastor or preacher. He can also perform certain church rituals. The deacon can be elected as a member of the council of elders in the local church. It is recommended that, if possible, he should at least have a basic theological education. The ministry of a deacon is not lifelong, but term-based, with four years per term. A deacon can hold his office for an indefinite number of terms, if it is so decided by the local church upon the end of his term. Deacons are ordained for their ministry.

The highest church-governing body is the assembly, and is comprised from all the full-fledged members of the local church. It is presided by the pastor or a preacher, ie., a presiding elder. The church assembly is where all the fundamental decisions are made regarding the present and future activities; internal church life and organization of the local church; the vision, mission, and constitutive documents of the church; as well as the financial budget. Since it's the Church assembly's task to elect the elders and the Church council, it also elects the leaders of specific ministries in the church.

As per the recommendation from the Union, a local church should have a body of elders as the executive body in its structure, and it should be elected and appointed by the Church assembly during its session. As recommended, the council of elders' term is four years. The elders are to execute the decisions made by the Church assembly. The elders will have their sessions once a month, and they will be presided over by the president of elders (or a presiding elder), who is elected at the first session of the council of elders. The pastor or preacher in a local church is one of the elders in terms of his ministry, but he doesn't necessarily have to be president of the council of elders. Local church council of elders is to be made up of at least three members.

Aside from the elders and deacons, the church council can also be comprised of the members of the local church who were elected by the Church assembly. The church assembly is the smaller convocation of the Church assembly to which it transfers a part of its authority with the competencies to elaborate on the decisions made by the Church assembly.

The administrative duties in church can be performed by one of the elders, or

the church secretary. A part of the administrative duties which are in his domain is performed by the pastor or the preacher in the church. The Church assembly appoints the church's treasurer and paymaster. In this way, the treasurer executes the decisions made by the Church assembly and he takes care of all the issues that pertain to church property and the way it is acquired. He can also be one of the elders. The paymaster takes care of the operative collection of financial assets and current payments, and he does as ordered by the treasurer or the church elders. The control of financial and cash operations is conducted by the church auditors, who will be appointed by the elders when necessary, which is at least once a year. Article 18 states:

the diversity of spiritual gifts in the local church is reflected in its numerous activities. In order for these affairs to be done in an organized and proficient manner, the work of the local church can be organized by sections, groups, committees, or sub-committees, which can be of more permanent character (working in Sunday school, working with literature, etc.), or occasional (special gatherings, building up, adapting, etc.).

At the Union Assembly session held on September 12<sup>th</sup> 2015, a *Procedure Book* was passed which defines the questions pertaining to the membership in the Union, the organization and structure of the Union Assembly, as well as the election of the Union ministers. It says that the work of the Assembly is public. Invited guests have the right to be present and to participate in the Union Assembly with no voting rights, while the right of participating in the Assembly sessions and making decisions and conclusions belongs to the representatives of full-fledged Union members, as well as to the members of the Executive Committee, and other bodies in the Union. The chairman suggests it to the Union Assembly, and the Assembly determines the final agenda for presentations through public voting. At the end of every presentation, the presiding member opens a debate and calls on all those present to discuss the matter. According to Article 11, "the registered disputants are given the floor in the order in which they applied. Any participant in the debate can ask and be granted the floor and debate a point of the agenda." Article 13 states, "The discussion about a presentation will remain open until all the disputants have presented their discussions, after which the formulation of conclusions and decision-making takes place. If an objection or an amendment is set forth against a conclusion or a decision, the Assembly will decide, through public voting, first about the amendment, and then decide about the final formulation of conclusions and decisions." Apart from the democratic right to participate in the assemblies and to express one's attitudes, all Union members can participate in electing the ministers of the Union. Article 16, paragraph 1 states that, "during the electoral session of the Assembly, the president, vice-president, main secretary and the treasures of the Union are elected through

secret voting, as well as the members of Executive Committee, and the president and vice-president of the Assembly.” The entire process and organization of the voting is described in Articles 16 through 21.

At the session that was held on September 12<sup>th</sup> 2015, the *Statute of Baptist Churches in Croatia* was adopted. In accordance with historical documents, it defines the local Baptist church as a fundamental structural unit in the Union. The fundamental governing body in the Union is the Assembly. The fundamental executive body of the Union is the Executive Committee of the Union, whose head is the Main secretary of the Union. It can be said that the Baptist believers of today gather in local churches, which have full autonomy in organizing and implementing church work, religious work and missionary work, presenting the teaching, and type of worship. The highest governing body in a local church is the assembly, which is comprised from all church members. The basis of organizing as a church is founded in the freedom and fullness of organizing believers in the local church on the one hand, and on the other, in the free will of the members of the same local church to join into various forms of fellowship with the purpose of fulfilling the essential mission of the church more efficiently. The assembly can transfer a part of its authority to the church committee or council, which represents the executive body of the local church. The Baptist Union unifies the local Baptist churches, and is the Baptist umbrella organization in Croatia, which officially represents the Baptist Church. The Baptist Union signed a *Contract On Matters Of Common Interest* with the Croatian government in 2003. In the Baptist Union, the local churches act through their representatives, who have been delegated for the Union Assembly in proportion with the number of the members in the local fellowship, in line with the historical practice in Baptist churches. The delegates are actively involved in debates and making decisions that are relevant to the Union. The novelty in the currently valid Statute is that, in the internal structure of the local church, it defines who the church ministers are. *In accordance with the Contract with the Croatian government, Article 12 states that a church minister is a person conducting the worship service.* For this purpose, the Contract and the Statute use the term “pastor” as an equivalent of the term “priest”. The Statute of the local Baptist churches recognizes and describes in detail the ministries of pastors, elders, and deacons. In it, it is stated that the church ministers are the pastor or preacher, an elder, and a deacon. A pastor or preacher is a full-time church minister and the most responsible person in the local church. He unifies the ministries of preaching and pastoral care. An elder is a church minister who leads the church committee, and he serves in governing over spiritual and material matters in the local church. The deacon serves in distributing the Lord’s Supper, and he is authorized to lead various ministries in church, such as taking care of material needs, charity work, social work, etc. Ordained church

workers are authorized to lead church rituals. The other church ministries, which don't require the laying on of hands, are Sunday School teachers, leaders of various groups in the church, and administrative church ministers; and they can be members of the church committee along with the elders and deacons. Article 9 of the local church Statute states that, "every member can be recognized as holder of one of the ministries in the local church. However, the local church particularly recognizes the members who are bearers of the charisma for the leading ministries in the local church. These ministries include: pastor or preacher, elder, and deacon. That is why this Statute also includes the equality of genders, which was often not the case in practice. The novelty that the currently valid Statute brings is defining the position of the Sunday School teacher. That is why Paragraph 3 of Article 12 states that, "For the special church minister who teaches religious education, the *Contract* uses the term 'catechist'. The mandate for holding the lectures based on the suggestion given by the local church is given by the authorized person in the Union." In Paragraphs 4-7 of the same Article it has been defined that the pastor performs all the rituals for which he has been publicly authorized, such as baptisms, weddings, funerals, and pastoral care services in public institutions, as laid in the *Contract* with the Croatian government. It also defines the procedure for ordaining church workers. All Union workers are entered the ministers' registry, which is kept by the main secretary of the Baptist Union. The Union keeps a registry of accredited pastors, accredited catechists, as well as elders and deacons. Every congregation is independent in regards to issues pertaining to internal structure. It is customary for a church fellowship to have a church committee, comprised of the preacher-pastor, paymaster, secretary, and a few elders and deacons. If necessary, meritorious believers with no formal role in the church can also become part of the committee. The believers become members of the fellowship through baptism, at the believers request, after their testimony about conversion. At the beginning of 2016, there were 52 active Baptist churches in Croatia.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

It can be generally said that the internal structure of Evangelical churches in Croatia is a mix of the congregational (equal value of all believers) and Presbyterian (elders and hierarchy) models. Depending on the religious fellowship, one model is more emphasized than the other. In the Baptist Union in Croatia, which belon-

5 <http://baptist.hr/o-baptistima/ustrojstvo-saveza/crkve-clanice> (downloaded on February 27<sup>th</sup> 2016)

gs among the Evangelical churches, the highest level of congregationalism is present. We could say that the congregational structure is the most democratic one. Democracy allowed the entire church, not just the hierarchy, to be socially and politically present. The church is called to encourage every believer to be socially active and present in the society, through encouraging personal change of one's life in light of God's Word. Changing the individual influences change the society as a whole. Only a free believer, who witnesses and actively practices their faith in Christ, can be active in creating a free society. That's why the Baptist principle of a "free church in a free country" contributes to the democratic internal leading and organization of church fellowships, by abolishing the exclusivism of individuals.

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*Translated from Croatian by Davor Edelinski*

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## **Crkva u demokratskom društvu i demokracija u crkvama reformacijske baštine s naglaskom na Baptističku crkvu u RH**

### **Sažetak**

Demokracija označava pluralistički oblik upravljanja u kojemu se odluke donose izravnim ili neizravnim putem, većinom glasova. Članak se bavi analizom suodnosa demokratičnosti društva i stupnja demokratičnosti u upravljanju lokalnom baptističkom crkvom Saveza baptističkih crkava u Republici Hrvatskoj, koja je strukturno temeljena na kongregacijskome modelu upravljanja.